

VZCZCXYZ0001
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHML #2520/01 1670504
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 160504Z JUN 06
FM AMEMBASSY MANILA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1536
INFO RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 1221

UNCLAS MANILA 002520

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR OES
STATE ALSO FOR ISN CTR - JASON RAO
STATE PASS EPA FOR DCUNNINGHAM
BANGKOK FOR REO JWALLER

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV EMIN ETRD TPHY TSPL RP

SUBJECT: Visiting EPA team advises GRP on chemical emergency response

REF: A. MANILA 1646
B. MANILA 1976

Summary

11. (U) At the request of the GRP and with support from Ambassador Kenney, four US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) emergency responders came to Manila to advise on the clean up of the high-profile mercury spill at St. Andrew's School (refs A,B). The team trained GRP personnel and private contractors to monitor mercury levels and sufficiently decontaminate the school. They also discussed chemical emergency response policies and procedures more broadly. As a result of the timely assistance, the GRP declared the school as safe and ready to open with the start of the new school year in June. During the team's visit, a Congressman filed a bill to ban the use of mercury and other hazardous chemicals from all schools in the Philippines. Sustained momentum may depend on additional funding. End Summary.

Building Response Capacity

12. (U) The GRP determined the school to be mercury-free on May 26, with the help of EPA experts Steve Calanog, Philip Campagna, Brian Brass and Duane Newell. The EPA team guided the Department of Interior and Local Governance (DILG) Special Rescue Unit (SRU), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Environmental Management Bureau (EMB), and private contractors in the clean up of the school, training them on use of the equipment, data analysis, and proper handling of contaminated materials. They helped test mercury levels of furniture, personal affects, and air conditioning units. During the clean up, the team found that the elevated levels of mercury stemmed from a previous spill in an adjacent room to the most recent spill. The contamination was isolated and resolved by removing the floor in the affected classroom. A private company had mostly addressed the most recent spill before the team arrived. A Philippine team also tested the home of one of the students who had reportedly taken home mercury, with the EPA team providing advice and guidance from a nearby location. According to SRU leader Major Embang, the team's visit helped boost the confidence of responders who had previously been unsure of themselves given their lack of prior experience in mercury decontamination.

¶3. (U) The EPA team also discussed an Incident Command System, which involves policies and procedures to prepare for and respond to mercury and other chemical spills from incident through clean up and remediation, with the Inter-Agency Committee on Environmental Health (IACEH) and the National Disaster Coordinating Council. They advised these interagency groups to set Philippine parameters based on the unique conditions and factors of this country and develop appropriate responses using locally available technologies. They provided insights on U.S. chemicals policies and environmental standards to safeguard children's health, occupational health, and public health of the surrounding community. According to IACEH member Dr. Irma Makalinao, the team's visit raised the confidence of officials within the Department of Health, DENR, and DILG Occupational Health and Safety Center who had previously debated the appropriate standards for certifying the school as safe for children and potentially pregnant teachers.

¶4. (U) According to the EPA team, DENR Secretary Reyes was supportive of protecting the environment and promoting the mining industry, although he acknowledged the use of mercury in mining operations. He expressed the need to strengthen the capacity of the DENR to monitor the environment around mines and in mining communities, and adequately address any mining-related accidents. [Note: Secretary Reyes recently allowed Australian mining company Lafayette to resume Philippine operations after a chemical spill that occurred in October. He told the press that the GRP would allow only responsible mining as a part of sustainable economic development. End Note.]

¶5. (U) Congressman Zialcita, whose district includes the school, took advantage of the enthusiasm around the EPA team's visit to announce a bill to ban mercury at all schools and public institutions in the Philippines. Another Congressman from an adjacent district also filed a bill to create a Philippine Environmental Protection Agency. The purpose of the new agency would be to establish an agency with authority to protect the environment against "pollution and other impacts occasioned by human activities." The US EPA team expressed concern that there is currently little authority to implement prevention and preparedness programs, complicated by the disparate groups and agencies given partial responsibilities and no additional funding for these duties.

Further Opportunities

¶6. (U) The team identified several follow-on areas that may benefit from the expertise of a Science Fellow or other type of assistance. A Fellow might consider assisting the GRP to set criteria for site risk assessments or action levels for various environmental contaminants and develop other environmental regulations and standard operating procedures specific to dangerous chemicals. The team also suggested an information campaign or school-based curriculum for handling chemicals, and a Fellow may help the DENR develop criteria for evaluating schools. Besides mercury, the team noticed a keen interest in oil spill prevention and cleanup, which may stem from the recent oil spill on Semirara Island that slicked approximately 300 acres of mangrove and beach. The team mentioned the possibility of returning to Manila in October for a planned international conference on the environment.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) The team's visit highlighted the need for more chemical safety awareness, strengthened chemical safeguards, and better preparedness for chemical disasters in the Philippines. The team donated personal protective equipment

at the end of the visit, which Post will formally present to DILG in the coming weeks. The visit sparked an interest in developing programs and standard operating procedures and there is great opportunity for USG involvement. While there are many areas for improvement, there was a general sense that appropriate agencies needed additional funding to develop meaningful, sustainable capacity and adequately equip talented professionals.

KENNEY